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Entertainment home

Celebrating 40 years of KISS

Gene Simmons says he prefers performing before a crowd rather than recording

By James Grant, nsfeatures@news-sentinel.com
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KISS, who'll be performing live Friday night at Memorial Coliseum, is not just a rock band, they're a brand.

Fans of KISS, called the KISS Army, can buy the group's likeness on everything from cell phone covers, T-shirts and water bottles to pinball machines, and at one time, believe it or not, a casket you could be buried in called a Kiss Kasket.

Gene Simmons, the demon-tongued bass player and co-founder of the group, is a proficient businessman and entrepreneur and the mastermind behind turning KISS from a successful hard rock band into one of the most successful brands in rock music.

Formed in the early 1970s, KISS originally consisted of Simmons along with Paul Stanley, Peter Criss and Ace Frehley.

Each group member took on a unique persona and each had elaborate face makeup and costumes that fit their specific character.

Simmons in his KISS stage attire dresses like a cross between a warrior and a serpent and represents the "Demon" persona.

Paul Stanley, the other co-founder and group mainstay, represents the "Starchild" with a giant black star painted over his right eye, while Criss became the "Catman" with cat whiskers painted on his face and Frehley represented the "Spaceman" with his space explorer-type stage suit and makeup.

Known for their theatrical stage show, which included Simmons breathing fire and spitting blood out of his mouth, KISS became one of the top concert acts of the 1970s.

From 1974-1979 the original configuration of KISS also became a wildly successful hard rock recording act that racked up multiple gold and platinum album awards for huge record sales as well as eight Top 40 hits, including their biggest hit, a ballad titled "Beth."

Taking a cue from how Disney promoted Mickey Mouse, Simmons also marketed KISS to younger fans, making millions from the sale of merchandise such as lunchboxes, dolls and trading cards.

As the 1980s dawned, KISS record sales began to slide, and by 1983 both Criss and Frehley had left the band due to personal issues and substance abuse.



Rock band KISS will perform Friday at Memorial Coliseum. (Courtesy photo)

More Information

'Rock 'n' Roll All Nite'

WHAT: KISS live in concert with the Dead Daisies – Freedom to Rock Tour

WHEN: 8 p.m. Friday

WHERE: Memorial Coliseum, 4000 Parnell Ave.

COST: \$25-\$400

For more information call the Memorial Coliseum box office at 483-1111 or buy tickets at 1-800-745-3000 or online at Ticketmaster.com.

ETC.: KISS has partnered with Hiring Our Heroes and Vet Tix to recognize veterans and members of the military as part of their Freedom to Rock tour. For the Fort Wayne concert, local Air National Guard Master Sgt. John Hovarter has been selected by Hiring Our Heroes to be the band's "Roadie for a Day" in support of the show. There will be a 5-minute tribute to the military during the concert, in collaboration with local Fort Wayne government and military leaders.

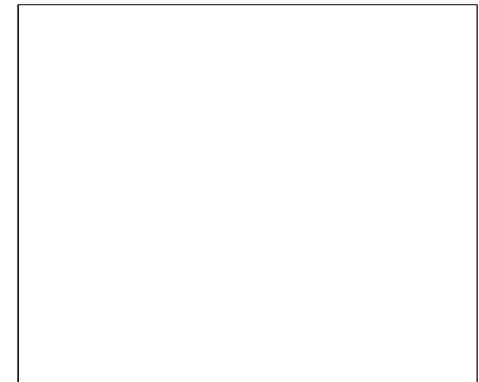
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KISS carried on, and from 1983 to 1996 appeared without their trademark make-up and personas and began to rebuild their career and record sales with various new members filling the spots left vacant by Criss and Frehley.

The original four members did reunite from 1996 to 2001 to tour and record a new album, once again appearing in their classic era make-up and personas.

By 2002 both Criss and Frehley left the band once more, and the original foursome ceased performing together, yet KISS carried on with two new band members joining Simmons and Stanley, who have always been the driving force behind KISS.

The current KISS line-up includes Simmons and Stanley in their original KISS persona and makeup, as well as Tommy Thayer on guitar portraying Ace Frehley's persona and Eric Singer on drums portraying Peter Criss's persona.

Simmons says the show at Memorial Coliseum will be a celebration of over 40 years of KISS music and will include all the familiar KISS anthems such as "Detroit Rock City," "Rock and Roll All Nite" and "Shout it Out Loud" and will also honor local veterans.

"It's an overview of our 42-year history," Simmons said of their current tour, "Freedom to Rock."

"We are bringing the full Gigantor stage show. We are ignoring New York, L.A., you know the big cities.

"We're going to the heartland, and we are teaming up with the U.S. Chamber of Congress and hiring local vets," Simmons added.

"We pay them, honor them, we give them big checks and they help our road crew put on the greatest show on earth."

Among the many songs that KISS will perform in their show, Simmons says he has a soft spot for a song called "Deuce" that reaches back to the very first KISS album from 1974.

"We move the songs around, but I guess 'Deuce' has a tug of the heart for me because it's one of the early songs that we often play. We'll probably play it now on tour," Simmons said of one of his favorite KISS songs to perform live.

"And a song is always more than a song, you know," Simmons said. "There's a favorite song that's also part of the memories to the soundtrack of your life. And that song has lots of memories for me."

One of the things Simmons enjoys about touring is the chance to see what songs audiences enjoy and being out among fans.

Though KISS has just recently been named America's No. 1 gold record-winning band of all time, Simmons says for him playing live motivates him more than making records in the recording studio.

"I don't like the recording process," Simmons said.

"KISS has never been a studio band. We don't have the temperament to stay in locked up for months. We're more a live band, and so being in the studio is torture for me. I just want to get out there," Simmons added. "Cause you know, half the fun is seeing what the audience gets off on."

Though Simmons has lived through rock stardom, television stardom with his family on his hit reality TV series entitled "Gene Simmons: Family Jewels" and has earned more money than some small countries, he says the most satisfying part of his entire career is just being himself.

"I get to be Gene Simmons every day," Simmons said. "It doesn't suck."

To listen to a recording of Jim Grant's interview with Gene Simmons, go to: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9HddRSJD4EM>.

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